

Working Ideas for Staff Development in the Academic Library

By

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As an instructional services librarian, a big chunk of my day-to-day responsibilities revolves around the coordinating of instruction requests from faculty members and the actual carrying out of the instruction itself. Not only do I respond to a massive amount of phone calls and emails that I receive sporadically each day, coming from a multitude of faculty members in various disciplines ranging from physical education to mathematics, but I may also teach as many as four of these instruction sessions while staffing the reference desk on any given day. Throw in obligations to professional development and commitments to campus and community service and you'll get an idea of just how hectic life can be during a semester in the academic library.

While many library personnel share similar working lifestyles during peak seasons at their respective libraries, it is not uncommon that a smaller, yet very important aspect of our organizational welfare gets overlooked. This area that I am referring to, which normally does not receive as much attention as it should, is that of staff development. Staff development is most likely seen as that peculiar annoyance that can be put on the back-burner for later tending to – something akin to cleaning out one's gutters after a steady dropping of fall leaves. In reality, staff development, if planned and executed properly, can be a successfully fluid function that enormously benefits not only the operations of a library but its patrons as well.

Why is staff development critical? Staff development is what keeps our libraries' operations running smoothly and efficiently. Staff development keeps employees up-to-date on new and existing services. Staff development helps to introduce new technologies to staff and gives them the tools and training to use them successfully in their specific work areas. Staff development helps keep employees connected to what is going on in their work environment as well as the library as a whole, and gives them a sense of power and usefulness, thus increasing the likelihood that they maintain enthusiasm for their work. And most importantly, staff development contributes to creating content patrons by keeping the library operating as efficiently as possible.

So what exactly is staff development? The Association of Research Libraries has gone to great lengths to provide a list of key components for creating staff development programs in libraries. The list is quite extensive and consists of seven components which can be found at http://www.arl.org/leadership/resources/staffdev/key_components.html. My feeling is that most organizations are not nearly in need of this type of comprehensive staff development. Some organizations most likely don't have any staff development in place at all. For this reason, I offer up my own definition which is this: Staff development can include anything done in an organizational manner to improve the working productivity, efficiency, and well-being of employees in an organization. Now although this is a vague definition, it's meant to be. The reason for this is that I suspect

that many libraries that do not conduct staff development initiatives, especially of smaller size, could benefit from creating staff development opportunities one small step at a time. So instead of creating a detailed five-year overarching plan that involves assessment and evaluation, libraries can begin smaller by identifying training needs and offering periodic opportunities for development that give employees a better understanding of organizational developments, additional skills for utilizing technology and resources, and a chance to spend time with others outside of their own departments.

Since coming to the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, I have been impressed with our library's simple, yet effective approach toward staff development. Our development consists of two main themes which involve training of staff and social engagement of staff. The origins of these two aspects began with the creation of two committees which run year-long and are comprised of library staff members who volunteer to serve on each committee. It is important that both professional librarians and library staff serve on our committees so that the needs of both groups can be defined and met. The two committees mentioned are the Staff Development Committee and the Social Concerns Committee.

The Staff Development Committee, not surprisingly, is the one that is most involved with the actual training aspects of library staff. Members of this committee help to identify training needs through surveys or other means, and then ensure the successful carrying out of the instructional programs. When our Staff Development Committee meets at the beginning of each semester, we decide what needs should be fulfilled in the training of staff in technology and information resources. We discuss items ranging from how many staff members would benefit from an instructional session on how to create spreadsheets, to how many circulation personnel will be needing instruction on using new media playing devices that we loan out. Since becoming a member of this committee, we have offered training sessions on using and downloading eAudiobooks from a database we subscribe to called NetLibrary. We have also offered training on using a digital art image database called ARTSTOR, and on assisting patrons with our integrated search tool for locating journal holdings in the library called Journal Finder. This past summer, our library decided after some careful analysis to undertake a new service which would allow our patrons to request reference information over an online platform known as Instant Messaging. In order to do so, we would have to ensure that all of the librarians who participated in reference coverage were comfortable carrying out a new technology-based service that may have previously been unfamiliar. Part of my job was to train librarians on the use of the instant messaging technologies. We have also educated staff on the use of other new technologies that we have available for circulation including MP3 players and portable DVD players. Our next staff development endeavor will be to offer scheduled workshops to train staff in basic and advanced uses of Microsoft Word and Excel. These sessions are part of a new series of workshops that the committee has decided to offer over the course of the academic year. Although these are two software programs that many librarians feel comfortable using, it is important to consider the needs of staff members whose job descriptions do not require as much experience with computing as others. This aspect of knowing your staff's needs is a critical part of the plan.

In addition to providing training opportunities for staff, the Sampson-Livermore Library works to offer social interaction events for members of the staff as well. In step

with providing these opportunities, the Staff Development Committee and the Social Concerns Committee work in tandem to determine event planning. Each year, the library holds a staff appreciation week where the committees work together to arrange events that are both socially engaging and educational. Events during the week may include a Lunch-and-Learn, where the committees organize a pot-luck lunch followed by presentations from speakers who discuss areas of staff interest. In the past, we have had speakers present on personal finance, health-related issues, campus affairs, academic topics, and recreational areas of interest. We also organize a day-long staff trip during the week to local areas of educational interest such as other libraries, museums, or places of historical significance. The committees usually attempt to organize at least two of these trips per year. The Social Concerns Committee also works on organizing other events throughout the year such as holiday parties and other special gatherings. This combination of social engagement and training opportunities helps our organization become more cohesive, keeping the lines of communication open.

In my personal job description, it is stated that I will provide training to staff on the use of technologies and resources. But the responsibilities of planning and successfully training staff as well as providing opportunities for social engagement, are shared amongst many members of our organization. It is important that in successful staff development, a combined effort including needs assessment, planning, and the carrying out of programs becomes a library-wide initiative. If the organization has little funding or lacks personnel to handle wide-scale development efforts, then the emphasis should be placed on providing development opportunities in small doses. Examples might be the creation of a development committee, a brief survey through email or web form to determine training needs, or a one-day workshop on the use of a new resource or work-related technology. The way I look at it, if staff members, who include anyone from librarians down to part-time circulation assistants, are not knowledgeable of what we have to offer our patrons as well as how to use these resources properly, we are running the risk of wasting money on resources and creating unsatisfied patrons. And the ability to offer staff members opportunities to spend quality time interacting and finding out more about their co-workers and their work areas, will in the long run prove to make for a healthier organization.

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